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ABSTRACT

Four books are discussed as being helpful in the teaching of playwriting at the college level: Kenneth Macgowan's "A Primer of Playwriting" (1951); Walter Kerr's "How Not to Write a Play" (1955); Bernard Grebanier's "Playwriting" (1961); and Sam Smiley's "Playwriting: The Structure of Action" (1971). The books are discussed individually and are compared in their treatment of the six major elements of play construction: plot, character, dialogue, theme, genre, and theatricality. Finally, a summary is given of each book's major strengths and weaknesses. (TS)

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ALL THE NONSENSE ABOUT RULES FOR PLAYWRITING

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"ALL THE NONSENSE ABOUT RULES FOR PLAYWRITING"

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> Avoid using animals on stage. They are a great nuisance, and are sure to misbehave. Cats will scratch or ruin the curtains, dogs will bark, monkeys will bite, rabbits will copulate. Any animal, before the run of a play is over, will urinate on the stage.

This, from a current playwriting textbook, suggests how far we have come from Aristotle. Sophocles was spared even The Poetics - but we must suffer, in Kenneth Macgowan's phrase, "all the nonsense about rules for playwriting" if it's textbooks we're after.

Why bother anyway? Did Shakespeare or Moliere need playwriting textbooks? For years I've resisted using a textbook in my playwriting courses; and, rather than classic models of excellence, I've preferred student work to exemplify principles. I've resisted confining the creative spirit to prescriptive plot structures. I've preferred to work with the student tutorially in relation to individual needs. If, in fact there were principles, they would prove themselves in the struggle of creation, rather than be prematurely imposed.

But I do have principles which guide my teaching. Why be coy about them? Why not, for the sake of clarity and honesty, make them available in textbook form? Let the students know what I know from the start, and be done with this benevolent ignorance.

What textbook then? No two agree on terminology. And when they define a term in common they apply it differently. Thus the climax of Hamlet has been learnedly located all over that play! Still, some books are better than others; and having explored about thirty of them, I've come up with four that I've found quite useful: Kenneth Macgowan's A Primer of Playwriting (1951); Walter Kerr's How Not to Write a Play (1955); Bernard Grebanier's Playwriting (1961); Sam Smiley's Playwriting: The Structure of Action (1971).

Rather than analyze each book separately, it would better suit my purpose to discuss their comparative treatment of the six major elements of play construction: 1. Plot; 2. Character; 3. Dialogue; 4. Theme; 5. Genre; and 6. Theatricality.

1. Plot. A plot can be derived, in Grebanier's view, from three essential sources: theme, character, or situation. Writing from personal experience is essential - but not necessarily in exactly that context, for this can lead to the dullest writing.

You can be too close to your material, warns Macgowan. "Almost all the people you meet and know - whether you know them deeply or superficially - must be changed, amplified, developed, twisted this way or that, to make them more interesting and more useful. You

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must put them through a kind of distillation process before they can fit your dramatic ends. . . . This process of distillation is even more essential if you deal with yourself."

Kerr deplores writing too close to life in imitation of the "tired model" of Ibsen and Chekhov. And reading, for Smiley, is a major source of material which can be more vivid than personal experience. After all, the Greeks and Elizabethans did well enough with literary sources.

It should go without saying that Western textbooks reflect the experience of Western theatre. As Richard Schechner has described it: ". . . the theatre of plays in which characters are developed along linear paths, and a story told without disruptive variation . . . . a western tradition, closely linked to our own kind of sequential logic and our historic faith in individual destiny." All our playwriting textbooks - with the exception of Smiley's - are manuals of "linear" form. The bulk of Smiley's book is in this vein. But he also discusses the alternative method of "configurative" form - the form of absurdist and environmental theatre - the form which can deal forthrightly, as Schechner puts it, with "randomness, disorder, anarchy, and simultaneity" - unified by theme, character, or mood - rather than story.

The major strength of Macgowan's book is its summary of linear theories. Marian Gallaway's Constructing a Play (1950), as quoted by Macgowan, defines a play in the linear mode: ". . .the pursuit of a strongly desirable objective by a protagonist who has chances to succeed against a powerful antagonist," with the "course of action . . . made somewhat devious by a number of complications" mounting in intensity toward "the playwright's end product, a dramatic climax . . . an intense experience of satisfaction for the audience in the final establishment on stage of a harmony broken or threatened during the play."

Samuel Selden's An Introduction to Playwriting (1946) provides us with a handy linear formula - "The Iron Check List." As described by Macgowan this PASTO comprises a play's five sections: "Preparation (which is largely expositional) Attack (the precipitation of the conflict by some word or act) Struggle (the 'guts' of the play, the conflict) Turn (another name for turning point, major crisis, or climax) Outcome (the ending . . . how it all works out . . . usually very brief . .. to satisfy the audience that the conflict is really won or lost)."

But the basic plot factor in Macgowan's judgement is complications. Complications are "facts or characters already planted in the play which are brought forward to create the suspense which makes an audience worry - which is the chief purpose of drama so far as technique is concerned." Kenneth Rowe's Write That Play (1939) is recognized for its singling out of three basic specimens: "the complication precipitating the attack" - the beginning of the struggle; "the crucial complication" - somewhat past the middle - which determines the conclusion; "the resolving complication" which concludes the play.

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Macgowan recommends Gallaway's method of building complications by employing the connectives "and, but, therefore." "'And' is usually more common in the first part of a play and is likely to indicate sound motivations, plenty of causes. 'But' shows contrast, conflict, and suspense. 'Therefore' indicates effect, logical coherence, and the consequences or resolution of a situation." For example, as in Maxwell Anderson's Elizabeth the Queen: "Elizabeth and Essex are politically incompatible. BUT They love each other uncontrollably. THEREFORE They vow never to part. BUT Cecil feels that Essex is a threat to England. THEREFORE He plots to send Essex away. AND Essex's pride causes him to fall into the trap. THEREFORE Cecil is able to intercept the correspondence of Elizabeth and Essex. THEREFORE Essex becomes angry and stages a coup d' etat. THEREFORE Elizabeth sends Essex to prison. BUT Still loving him, she tries to save him. BUT In prison Essex has realized that he would not make a good King. THEREFORE He refuses her offer. THEREFORE Essex must die; Cecil's plot has succeeded."

One puzzling aspect of Macgowan's book is his strong denial of the widely held notion that conflict and change are essential to Drama. Kerr defines Drama as the "art of change - and without conflict there can be no change." The story's the thing for this maverick high-brow. The plays we most admire, he writes, are a "beehive of activity."

Kerr defines story a-la Aristotle: Beginning: "Motivating pressures are beginning to clamor for response." Middle: "The response is given and the inevitable conflict joined." End: "The contest between pressure and response has resulted in a different relationship between the two things, a new state of affairs, a changed state of affairs." "The wolf . . . is hammering at my door. I must do battle, or I die. I do battle. The wolf is routed; or I am."

Smiley defines plot as "structured action." All plays have plots whether structured in "linear" or "configurative" form. Linear or Story form is outlined by Smiley as having ten basic elements: 1. Balance - Strained equilibrium between two opposing forces. Implications of potential upset; 2. Disturbance - Initiating event that upsets the balanced situation and starts the action; 3. Protagonist - Character most affected by the disturbance - usually sets about to restore the balance; 4. Plan - Which the protagonist develops to restore the balance; 5. Obstacles - Any factors that oppose or impede his progress to fulfill his plan; 6. Complications - Any factors positive or negative which cause a change in the course of action; 7. Sub-story - if used should reflect, contrast, or affect the main story; 8. Crisis - Whenever the protagonist confronts an obstacle with outcome uncertain and a decision imminent; 9. Climax - Always follows the crisis (but can be withheld till later). The moment of decision when the crisis is settled. (There is a major climax at the end of a play when the balance is restored.); 10. Resolution - Specific circumstances resulting from the major climax.

Grebanier's approach to linear form differs from most others.

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Derived from William T. Price's The Analysis of Play Construction (1908), it centers on the three step Proposition: 1. The Condition of the Action -"the event which holds the root of the cause of the action - the first significant event of the play." "Romeo, scion of a family at feud with Juliet's family, falls in love with Juliet at first sight." 2. The Cause of the Action -"the event which follows from the condition of the action and which raises a question which the rest of the play must answer." "Although their families are at feud, Romeo marries Juliet." 3. The Resulting Action - "the bulk of the play." The question raised by the cause of the action - "Will Romeo find happiness in his marriage with Juliet?" is answered.

"The Proposition always deals with events in which both the central and second characters are concerned."

Equally important in Grebanier's theory is his definition of the climax. "The climax of the play is its turning point. . . . It determines more or less what the direction of the rest of the play is to be. It is the moment in which the most violent dislocation occurs between the central and second characters. It is always a deed performed by the central character and involves not the second but a third character. It occurs somewhere past the middle of a full length play as part of the working out of the third step - never during the last few minutes of the play." Thus the climax of Romeo and Juliet for Grebanier is the killing of Tybalt.

"In the one-act play the proportioning of the action in terms of the Proposition and the location of the climax are both notably different. The resulting action is the shortest part of the play. The cause of the action raises the question of the play and the question is answered fairly rapidly. The climax comes near the final curtain."

Variously considered are the plot elements of preparation (exposition, plants, and pointers) which serve to create believability and suspense. Grebanier's view of exposition is representative: "All the facts of the story preceding the opening incident are brought in parenthetically, but not haphazardly - not thrown at the audience all at once - but introduced where they are dramatically pertinent." A plant is information providing the background for subsequent deeds, while a pointer is information impelling the audience to look ahead.

Smiley and Macgowan urge the writing of a detailed scenario before composition. Grebanier suggests the possibility of a trial first act. Neil Simon's remarks in this context are revealing: "I read all those books on playwriting that said you must make an outline. So I wrote the outline and then I started to write the play, and the play started to go over this way, and I said, 'Come back, you have to get back in the outline.' The play was getting worse and worse, but it was in the outline. I decided on the next play I'd outline just the first act and then see what happened in the

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second and third acts. Then I got bored with doing even that. If I have the entire idea in my mind and know basically what it is I want to accomplish I would rather be as surprised as the audience is."

One further significant aspect involves the basic unit of plot construction. Grebanier suggests, as many others do, the "French scene" unit where the exit or entrance of any character begins a new scene. Smiley further reduces the unit to the dialogue "beat." A beat is a section of dialogue which performs a specific function - furthering the story, delineating character, or expressing theme or mood. A beat, like a scene, is a play in miniature with a structure of stimulus, rise, climax, ending and/or transition to the next beat. Writing by beats is a most useful method of dramatic construction.

2. Character. There are four ways of revealing a character in a play: what he looks like, what he says, what is said about him, what he does. Most important is this last. What a person does in a time of crisis best reveals his character. Character divorced from situation is lifeless, says Kerr. Situation stirs the fires of creative characterization. Character is heightened by story because there is a correlation between "the range of a play's activity and the size of its characterization. . . . It takes a certain number of psychological responses to enable a man to stir a cup of tea. It takes a good many more to enable him to kill his father."

According to Macgowan a good character is believable, complex, rich in personality and tendency to clash with other characters. Plot can never make character, he writes, while character makes plot. But Grebanier insists that the needs of the plot create the characters.

Smiley offers the most extensive discussion of character in Drama. He analyzes six crucial traits - biological, physical, dispositional, motivational, deliberative, and decisive. Each significant trait should comprise a beat of its own. Types are desirable, but not stereotypes.

That the central character must be sympathetic is denied by Macgowan. For Smiley this "attractiveness" is a crucial quality for most major characters. Kerr opts for characters with "lively minds and colorful ways," and Grebanier concludes: "In any satisfactory play there must be at least one character for whom the audience has sympathy. A play in which there is no one for whom one would give a row of pins cannot sustain the interest of an audience."

All agree that you need to know your characters thoroughly before you write your play. The writing of biographies of each character is highly recommended - with particular attention to distinctive traits.

3. Dialogue. "Comprehensibility and interest are the criteria

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for good dialogue," in Grebanier's judgement. "The beginning and the end of a sentence are the strongest positions. The most important things said must be here. Any given speech must convey one dramatic idea and/or only one ruling emotion. Poetry is the natural vehicle for speech in the theatre - language rich in imagery."

Kerr is emphatic on that point. He deplores the slow motion dialogue of realists like John Van Druten, and the practice of modern playwrights to rely on emotions enclosed in parentheses (angrily) (desperately) rather than on the power of words. Verse is language natural to the theatre because it "saves the dramatist time" and "binds the auditor fast." Its "most characteristic power," however, is "its capacity for working in depth. Verse is able to descend into those recesses of personality and experience for which we have no adequate rational labels, to mine the soul of man for whatever is inexplicable about him."

Smiley supports all this and includes an extensive analysis of English grammar, syntax, and style.

4. Theme. "A good theme is an interpretation of life, not a lecture on it." So writes Grebanier. "Beware of the propaganda play," Macgowan warns. "A good way to destroy a play," says Kerr, "is to force it to prove something. . . . Life, caught in its complex immediacy doesn't present itself as a tidy equation." However, Smiley discusses at length and with sympathy "the tradition of persuasive, thought-oriented plays." Didactic Drama, he insists, is a "still productive source of energy."

5. Genre. Tragedy and comedy, realism and the departures from it, are examined most fully in Grebanier and Smiley. Grebanier includes an excellent discussion of the rise of symbolism in Drama. Smiley is unique in his ample treatment of Epic, Absurdist, and Environmental Theatre.

Macgowan is struck by the "paradox of tragedy" that the victim's greatness causes his downfall, and although he is doomed he achieves his objective.

Grebanier's definition of tragedy is Aristotle's. "A tragedy must evoke both pity and awe in the audience. Pity is compassion. Awe is evoked by the revelation of man's littleness in the face of the complexities he must deal with (God, Nature, Society), and by man's greatness of soul in standing up, despite his littleness, against those complexities. The hero of tragedy is a person above average in qualities, a good person marred by a fatal shortcoming which causes his doom at the climax of the play."

Grebanier's discussion of expressionism suggests his antipathy to configurative form. Kerr is bluntly hostile to both the drabness of realism in the Ibsen-Cheknow image and the obscurity of expressionism in the Strindberg fashion. He notes that "of all the forms of our time, musical comedy is the only one to make use of free, unrealistic backgrounds; rapid leaps through time and space; bold color; heightened language (in its lyrics); rhythm (in its

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music); dynamic movement (not only in its dance, but everywhere); direct address to the audience." Something approximating this dynamic genre is what is needed to revive our theatre.

6. Theatricality. To what extent must a playwright consider the theatrical elements of stage, scenery, lighting, sound, acting, and directing in the process of writing? For Artaud's prime spokesman, Richard Schechner, the question is impertinent. Plays are not dramatic literature. The script is only one aspect of theatre. Smiley discusses Schechner's notion of the playwright as WRIGHTer - the play being wrought from the interrelationship among all theatre artists.

Smiley provides us with considerable data on the role of theatrical elements in Drama; and his book is unique in its chapter on the significance of sounds for the playwright.

Macgowan hardly considers this matter; but Grebanier offers a brief discussion of the effect of staging conditions on structure. And Kerr deplores what procenium staging has done to playwriting. His book is a manifesto promoting a return to more imaginative theatrical methods.

Grebanier suggests approaches to finding a producer for the finished play. But Smiley includes a whole chapter on the subject with much useful information.

In summary, then, A Primer of Playwriting is just that. It is brief and concise and a virtual anthology of playwriting theory prior to its printing. I find fault with Macgowan's minimizing of conflict, change, and attractiveness as crucial principles; and the book is insufficient in coverage. I think it best serves as a reference work not to be required.

How Not to Write a Play is manifestly biased against realism and expressionism. Ibsen and Chekhov are misrepresented for the sake of Kerr's thesis. His absolute commitment to the story form would deny Schechner's theatre as totally as Schechner dismisses Kerr's. The emphasis on dramatic magnitude may mislead the young writer toward pretension and bombast. Yet the book remains a needed call to greatness. With vigor and verve it accounts for the appeal of our classic playwrights; and it urges a renewal of playwriting form. Not meant to be a textbook, it can function well as recommended reading along with, say, Schechner's Public Domain to exemplify two contrasting critiques of realism.

Playwriting is a delightful book. The succinctness and vitality of its writing style well recommend it. Grebanier's principles are clearly defined and fully exemplified. They are readily accessible in italicized statements which together constitute an excellent check list for playwrights. It includes an ample appendix of illustrative exercises. On the whole, it is an excellent textbook. The Proposition, however, has one limitation: Grebanier indicates that it can't work without material to shape; it comprises the general structure of the play, but it does not account for the

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specific structure from beat to beat. In this respect, patterns like Selden's, Gallaway's and Smiley's may be more useful to the playwright in the initial stages of gathering material and in his first efforts at shaping it. The book works best as a check on effective construction.

There is no fuller treatment of the dramatist's art than Playwriting: The Structure of Action. Smiley's thoroughness is the book's major strength - as well as its weakness. Its helpful facts and incisive judgements are too often overwhelmed by material of only minimal relevance. Moreover, the endless categories - "There are seven kinds of this which in turn can be divided into four types of that." - may intimidate the student, and smack more of Polonius than Aristotle. Nevertheless, it is a most useful text in its comprehensiveness.

Still the question lingers: "Who needs all this knowledge?" So many playwrights have done well without textbooks. Why can't we? Suit yourself. But knowledge it remains - proven and useful. Knowledge which can help you avoid years of wasteful trial and error. Amid "all the nonsense of rules for playwriting," one can still emerge a little wiser.